

## Beyond courtesy stigma

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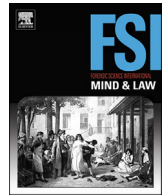
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## Prisons and Probation

## Beyond courtesy stigma: Towards a multi-faceted and cumulative model of stigmatisation of families of people in prison

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## ABSTRACT

The stigmatisation of families of people in prison has been well-documented in research which explored the experiences of these families. However there has, to date, been very little theorisation of this phenomenon. This article proposes a model of stigmatisation that brings together social psychological work on opinion formation, sociological work on stigma, and analyses of neoliberalism to construct a theoretical framework for analysing why someone associated to a in prison might experience stigma. It argues that stereotypes play a strong role in demonising both people who offend and their families, which is exacerbated by the fact that many of these families are drawn from marginalised backgrounds. Thus, the proposed model considers both courtesy stigma, but also stigma associated with class, race, and poverty. Moreover, it is argued that neoliberalism as a political and economic project has further weaponised this stigma, turning the socially excluded into deviant “others” to be shunned and feared. The stigma families of people in prison report is thus both multi-faceted and cumulative. It originates from their link to someone in prison and their socially excluded backgrounds, and is magnified by neoliberalism. Understanding this complexity allows us to fully comprehend not only why these families are stigmatised, but also to develop the scholarship on stigma more broadly by drawing on social psychology. Finally, it helps us develop an understanding of how neoliberal punitivism reaches beyond the people in prison and into the lives of those related to them.

## 1. Introduction

Research on the experiences of families of people in prison has explored the numerous ways in which penal power extends its reach into their lives in a process that has been called ‘secondary prisonisation’ (Comfort, 2009). This is defined as the extent to which the pains and deprivations associated with imprisonment are felt by the families of those in prison (Comfort, 2007). These include financial difficulties, practical challenges associated with visiting and otherwise maintaining contact, stigma and coping with grief-like emotions (see Condry, Kotova, & Minson, 2016 for an overview). A key theme highlighted within this literature is stigmatisation. This is defined as a ‘discrediting attribute’ (Goffman, 1963) that makes one morally lower than others. Attributes may be physical (eg skin colour) or invisible (eg one’s status as someone who committed a criminal offence). A variant of this concept usually utilised in the context of families of people in prison (eg Condry, 2007) is ‘courtesy stigma’: the process through which one’s identity is tainted by virtue of their association with the directly stigmatised individual (Goffman, 1963). Thus, the process of stigmatising is a manifestation of a negative value judgement.

This article argues that we need to return to Goffman’s original conceptualisation of stigma as a *social* phenomenon, and go beyond simply recounting instances of stigmatisation, as the current literature on families of people in prison has thus far tended to do (Comfort, 2007; May, 2000; Condry, 2007; Fishman, 1990). It asks: what are the social, economic, cultural and political forces involved in these families being stigmatised? It seeks to develop the literature on stigma of families of people in prison by engaging with the macro-dynamics involved in stigmatisation in order to develop the wealth of micro-level evidence of how individual families of people in prison are stigmatised.

In constructing a theoretical framework of stigma of families of people in prison, this article begins with the social psychological work on opinion formation, which is arguably the natural starting point for any analysis of stigma but has thus far not been engaged with by scholars interested in families of people in prison. This social psychological work outlines the importance of (negative) stereotypes, which are key to stigmatisation. The article then discusses the stereotypes about people in prison and their families, and how the media and political discourses strengthen these stereotypes, thus exacerbating stigma. Finally, it argues that neoliberalism further weaponises stigma and portrays excluded

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populations as being responsible for their plight and therefore as deviant. This is critical because, as will be discussed, many families of people in prison are drawn from socially excluded backgrounds, and the intersection of their link to someone in prison and their socio-economic status (and ethnicity and gender), and how these shape stigma, has not yet been analysed.

This article uses existing research on families' experiences of stigma to evidence the theoretical claims made. This article draws on a review of existing literature that focuses or touches on stigma experienced by families of people in prison across, including work conducted in the UK, Europe and the US. Since this field is relatively small, albeit growing, the author is confident that a thorough review of literature was conducted. Publications were searched for any discussion of stigma and further for any discussion of direct stigma associated with characteristics such as poverty or race. This work on families of people in prison is then married to sociological research on stigmatisation in the context of poverty and other stigmatised characteristics, and uses these empirical works to construct a theoretical framework utilising social psychological research on opinion formation.

It is recognised that much work is yet to be done if we are to understand what drives the stigma experienced by different groups of families of people in prison, including Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) families. The framework developed here allows for the complexity and heterogeneity of experiences to be analysed and encourages future researchers to engage with the sociological complexity of stigmatisation. It also shows that stigmatisation is a dynamic process that occurs within a specific socio-political context, and that in order to fully analyse the experiences of legally innocent families of people in prison, the role of social injustices needs to be understood. In engaging with these issues, this article aims to take the discussion of stigma beyond 'courtesy stigma' and highlight how families are stigmatised both because they are connected to someone in prison, and because they themselves are often marginalised. This article focuses on the UK context, but the theoretical framework is flexible and therefore it might be possible to apply this to other jurisdictions and contexts (such as experiences of families of people who use drugs).

## 2. A return to a sociological approach to stigma

Analyses of the experience of families of people in prison ought to move beyond simply analysing instances of stigmatisation and fear of stigma, and view stigma as Goffman (1963) did. According to him, stigmatisation operates as an instrument of power rather than simply being an individual's reaction to someone with a discrediting characteristic. Stigmatisation, thus, involves separating people into 'us' and 'them', which is an inherently social process. As Tyler and Slater (2018, p. 727) argue, there needs to be greater 'consideration of the social causes, and indeed the political function of particular modalities of stigma production'. This implies that we cannot see stigma as a solely bottom-up process of individuals reacting negatively to other individuals, and ought to explore how stigma comes to be within specific socio-political contexts. After all, as will be shown in this article, the reactions they might receive as not just relatives of someone in prison but also as people drawn overwhelmingly from socio-economically marginalised populations.

Despite research (May, 2000; Condry, 2007; Comfort, 2007), demonstrating, in rich qualitative detail, the micro-level instances of social and institutional stigmatisation experienced by families, there is a dearth of theoretical exploration of the sociological processes at work. Condry (2007) has theorised why 'courtesy stigma' occurs in her book on the shame and stigma experienced by families of serious offenders. Despite her focus, her concept of a 'web of shame' can be applied to the experiences of all families of people in prison. The 'web of shame' refers to a number of strands through which stigma is transferred from the person in prison to their relatives outside. Some relatives, such as parents, reported being seen as being of the same 'bad stock' as their

imprisoned relative. In addition, relatives were sometimes deemed to have failed in their duty to prevent the offending behaviour, and others were directly blamed for being causally linked to the offending – for example, parents were blamed for not bringing up their children to be law-abiding citizens. Implicit in Condry's research is the notion that stigmatisation does not occur individualistically at a micro-level only – the biologicistic stereotype, for example, is a powerful cultural stereotype.

In order to ensure we meaningfully return to a sociological approach to stigma, this paper will use micro-level approaches to opinion formation drawn from social psychology. These approaches provide the foundations for a theoretical framework for understanding how negative opinions about families of people in prison are formed. Nonetheless, there is also a need to ensure macro-dynamics are engaged with. Although social psychology has a sense of the social, sociology (such as the work of Tyler, discussed below) addresses socio-political contexts in much more detail. Therefore, this paper marries these two approaches to develop a robustly sociological analytical framework.

## 3. The process of generalised opinion formation

Stereotypes are integral to stigma (Goffman, 1963). Qualitative micro-level research shows that negative stereotypes about families of people in prison are prevalent. In her work on families visiting prisons in England and Wales, Hutton (2018) reported that families were cognisant of being stereotyped by some prison staff as being badly behaved and untrustworthy simply because they were visiting a prisoner. Hutton also overheard an officer referring to a child visitor as a 'C and R kid',<sup>1</sup> referring to a bored child's behaviour as if akin to an adult in prison breaking rules. US wives of men in prison also experienced a wide range of stigmatisatory behaviour because communities 'expect[ed] them to account for their husband's criminal acts' (Fishman, 1990, p. 119). These empirical data clearly illustrate 'courtesy stigma'.

It should however be noted that empirical research also found that families often fear stigma to a greater extent than they actually experience it. Fishman, for example, found that 'wives anticipated evaluations from community members more often than they actually encountered them' (Fishman, 1990, p. 119). This should be included in the definition of stigmatisation, however, because even feared stigma can still be a powerful experience – some women for instance felt so stigmatised they did not leave their homes (May 2000). Considering fear of stigma can therefore inform us about how these families feel they are perceived by society regardless of any abuse or shunning taking place.

Other empirical findings indicate families can be stereotyped by virtue of their socio-economic status. Moore (2016: 36), in her US thesis, found that wives of men in prison felt that society stereotyped them as uneducated, deviant and/or gullible. One participant said society saw women like her as 'bottom of the barrel' (Moore, 2016, p. 36). In the UK, Foster (2017, p. 209) also found that 'prisoners' families are often poor... [which] also involves experiencing stigma and shame stemming from this experience', though she did not explore this aspect of stigma in detail. These findings highlight the need to explore direct stigma as well as 'courtesy stigma', because 'the most profound stigmatisation often occurs at the intersection of multiple forms of exclusion' (Cornish, 2006, p. 465).

At this point, it is necessary to take a step back and consider the psychological mechanisms at work. Evolutionary psychology has argued that humankind has evolved moral heuristics, which are the 'decision rules that quickly produce social and moral judgements, based on limited information' (Cosmides & Tooby, 2006, p. 182). We make judgements about groups continuously; for example, we are asked to vote in favour of punitive or rehabilitative policies in relation to people who offend, or for policies affecting those who seek benefits (Petersen & Aaroe, 2012). To make these decisions, we need to first form an opinion about this group.

<sup>1</sup> This refers to control and restraint techniques used on prisoners.

A negative opinion of a group makes the individuals within it vulnerable to stigmatisation.

Yet there is a fundamental problem. Whereas we have evolved to make moral judgements about specific individuals, the scale of modern politics requires us to generalise about large groups (Petersen, 2009). This means that whereas humankind evolved to make value judgements about given others, such as one's neighbour Mary, for example, we are often asked to make judgements about larger and diverse groups of people whom we do not know personally. This includes being asked to vote on policies that affect groups of people, such as penal policy. We have to make a judgement about such groups without knowing all the individuals that make up this group, and having not evolved to make such large-scale judgements. Thus, the 'general nature of modern political debates clashes with the input conditions of evolved moral heuristics', which evolved as 'context-sensitive systems' (Petersen, 2009, p. 369).

This is where stereotypes become exceedingly important. Social psychological research asserts that we utilise two systems for making decisions (Kahneman, 2011, a review). System 1 operates upon implicit assumptions about individuals and/or situations, with this information being inputted in the format of images and metaphors (Berger, 2007). Since this system is quick and not reliant on logical processing of information, it relies on *stereotypes*. Stereotyped information is used to help us form general political opinions about groups as a whole (category-based inference) and operates as a 'particular kind of decoupled cognition' (Petersen & Aaroe, 2012, p. 811). Notably, Petersen (2009: 371) found also that stereotyped information is especially powerful in helping us make category-based inferences when these stereotypes 'explicitly picture the relevant target group in an evolutionary significant way, such as cheaters or exploiters'. Thus, stereotypes are especially powerful when they are *negative*.

Prior to discussing the content of stereotypes, it is important to map out the link between stereotypes, media, politics, and stigma. It is difficult to extrapolate any causal links between media coverage of penal issues and public opinion (Mason, 2007). As Mason (2007) argues, the media buttresses punitive and stigmatisatory responses more often than individual members of the public. He notes that the media often provides no evidence for its suggestion that the public is punitive. Indeed, the public tends to be less punitive when actually informed about the sentences given in real cases (eg Gelb, 2009) rather than asked general questions about their attitudes to all people who offended. In the UK context, Hough and Roberts (1999) found that the public tended to under-estimate the severity of sentences when asked about sentencing of people who offended generally. Yet when given a specific case-study of an offence with contextual information such as the value of what was stolen, about half of the respondents who were given a menu of sentencing options including but not limited to imprisonment opted for a sentence that did not involve time in prison. This was more lenient than actual sentences in such cases and supports the view that when asked to form an opinion about given individuals, the public is less likely to rely on stereotypes.

Yet it is important to recognise that negative media and policy discourse can often make families *feel* stigmatised even when no one close to them does anything to stigmatise them overtly. The research participants quoted earlier in this article spoke about *feeling* like society was looking down on them and seeing them as bad people. We cannot know whether people around them actually did hold these views; but the fact that they felt stigmatised is nonetheless significant. In fact, instances of actual stigmatisation (eg verbal abuse) may only reinforce this sense of being seen as 'less than'. As Mason (2007) found, 'misleading and inaccurate stories which construct prison and prisoners as high risk, dangerous...not only bolster support for government policy built upon mass incarceration, but construct public opinion as overtly supporting it too'. Even if no one does anything to stigmatise given families, they might *feel* socially stigmatised more broadly because the media conveys a strongly negative, stereotyped view of people in prison and those

associated with them.

### 3.1. Stereotypes about offending and the role of the family

At this point, we need to discuss the content of prevalent stereotypes about offending behaviour and about the role of the family in offending. These stereotypes are what underlie the strong 'courtesy stigma' reported by families of people in prison across numerous empirical studies (eg Condry, 2007; Condry et al., 2016). Tversky and Kahneman (1974) have argued that when System 1 is used to make judgements, one key factor is the availability heuristic. This refers to the ease with which the person making the judgement can remember particular categories of people or events. Thus, the more cases someone can recall of a particular portrayal of families of people in prison, the more likely it is that the person will hold a corresponding view of such families. The media, as well as cultural and policy discourses are therefore important because both play key roles in informing the public about families in this context.

There is a long-standing tradition within criminology to link the family with criminal behaviour. Control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969) places the blame for criminal behaviour at the feet of the family, amongst other social institutions. According to this theory, parents play an important role in instilling pro-social values within children, and if the child's social ties are inadequate, he or she is more likely to become delinquent. Although control theory also discusses other institutions, such as schools, the stereotype of the criminal family is a culturally and politically powerful one. It can be noted in books and films, with *Sons of Anarchy*, *The Sopranos* and numerous films about the Kray brothers being some examples. It is no surprise thus that Condry (2007) found families being stigmatised on the grounds that they were of the same 'bad stock' as their imprisoned relative, and for 'failing' to control their offending relative. This theme was also highlighted in May's (2000: 204) work on families of people who committed murder. One relative said that society feels families 'come out of the same mould', and thus saw the family as bad by association.

Moreover, this discourse is prevalent within policy – family is often the institution specifically blamed for delinquent behaviour (as opposed to other institutions; this article will return to this interesting point). The Troubled Families program, a UK program that aimed to help 120,000 of the most "troubled" families in the country to turn their lives around via helping them address poor parenting patterns, violence, and crime through initiatives such as dedicated family workers. Under the program, the government aimed to 'halt the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage...seen in some families...where no-one is working or where there is a history of inter-generational worklessness' (HM Government, 2012, p. 43). Importantly, crime was explicitly one key issue the program was introduced to tackle, thereby directly linking parenting with childhood deviance. This program has been strongly criticised for conflating families with troubles like poverty and troublesome families causing unrest in and harm to neighbourhoods (Levitas, 2012). In fact, it found that only a small minority of families involved in the program had any contact with the criminal justice system or children with recorded offences (Crossley, 2015). Yet this policy did reinforce the blameworthiness of the family in the context of offending, as well as failing to recognise the need to invest in other institutions such as community centres.

Another example is Parenting Orders – a type of court order that could be used to compel a parent to control their child – under Section 58 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. Patten, the then-Minister of State for the Home Office, stated that these orders were needed because 'parents could cope, but simply chose not to' (Hansard, vol. 49, col. 767). Again, the image of the irresponsible family shirking its responsibility for the child was reinforced. This arguably failed to recognise that parents may struggle to control their children for various reasons, such as needing to work long hours to support the family financially, mental health issues, and single-parent household structures. These structural challenges were considered (Burney & Gelsthorpe, 2008); and simplistic stereotypes were once again fallen back on. As Foster (2017: 173) concluded, 'a



contemporary discourse about “broken” families provides one vehicle for persistent contamination effect for families with a loved one involved in the criminal justice system’.

### 3.2. Stereotypes about people in prison

Arditti, writing in the US context, pointed out that families operate within a society that stigmatises imprisonment and prisoners (Arditti, 2012), which means that how we view people in prison will shape the ‘courtesy stigma’ experienced by their families. Again, stereotypes are important here because people rarely step inside prisons and the only available information about people in prison comes from the media. The availability heuristic discussed earlier is especially relevant in this context. The media in the UK, especially tabloid media, often portrays all people in prison simplistically as mythical monsters, describing them uniformly using terms like ‘thugs’ and ‘murderers’ (Mason, 2006). In one case of a man convicted of killing his infant child, the issues raised by the defence – such as his poor mental health – were almost entirely omitted from the media coverage. Instead, headlines spoke of a “‘Callous and Brutal’ Father” (Cockcroft, 2014, for Mailable). In other words, the media image of the person in prison is an extremely limited and distorted one (Mason, 2006 and 2007).

The visibility heuristic is thus especially powerful in the context of prisons, prisoners and people associated with them. Studies have shown that the public are often very poorly acquainted with key areas of the criminal justice system (eg Chapman, Mirrlees-Black, & Brawn, 2002); more worryingly, above 90% believe their sources of information to be accurate (Levenson, 2001). As discussed earlier, stereotypes become more powerful when they speak to primal fears about being hurt or exploited. Criminal behaviour, especially that which can result in a prison sentence, is of course potentially dangerous and exploitative behaviour. When discussing prisoners, the media often focuses on the dangerous individuals – as mentioned above, those who commit murder and rape. Yet this is a stereotype only – around 70% of people in prison in England and Wales are convicted of non-violent crimes (Prison Reform Trust, 2019). The image of the person in prison as dangerous and violent therefore does not reflect reality; yet the stereotype remains prominent in popular culture and media.

### 3.3. Stigmatising social injustice

Research also indicates families may be directly stigmatised because they are overwhelmingly drawn from socially excluded populations (see earlier discussion). Now, since most of the research into stigma experienced by families of people in prison focused, unsurprisingly, on ‘courtesy stigma’, we know very little about this direct stigmatisation, other than the few quotes from studies that looked at experiences of families of people in prison already discussed in this article.

What we do know is that forms of socio-economic exclusion, such as poverty, are stigmatised, and that many of these families often experience numerous disadvantages, or, to use a term colleagues and I have used elsewhere, social injustices (Condry et al., 2016, see also ; Arditti, 2012). Social injustices refer to the ‘denial or violation of economic, socio-cultural, political, civil, or human rights of specific populations or groups in the society based on the perception of their inferiority’ (Levy & Sidel, 2006, p. 6). Studies in the US (Sykes & Pettit, 2015) and Australia (Besemer & Dennison, 2015) have found high levels of social exclusion amongst families of people in prison. This includes relative financial deprivation and unmet health needs. Significant economic disadvantage and reliance on welfare benefits has been identified (Smith et al., 2007) as a key issue for families in the UK. Thus, we need to recognise that families of people in prison are drawn disproportionately from socially excluded populations.

Poverty, claiming benefits and being of a lower socio-economic class have all been linked with stigma. There is a long history of stigmatising the poor: they were associated with crime and disease in the 16th and

17th centuries (Geremek, 1997). Having certain characteristics, such as being working class or claiming benefits, thus makes one, *prima facie*, vulnerable to direct stigma (as opposed to courtesy stigma). This is often because being poor carries stereotyped connotations of a lack of will-power and the willingness to ‘live off the state’ (Janky, Bako, Szilagyi, & Bogнар, 2014). This stereotype is perpetrated in the media via the image of the lazy ‘benefits scrounger’ (Briant, Watson, & Philo, 2011) and that of the working-class inner-city estate as being populated with the underclass of failed individuals (Jones, 2011). A distinction is made, therefore, within the popular discourse between the underclass (the undeserving poor) and the respectable poor. In fact, Pemberton, Fahmy, Sutton, and Bell (2016) found that people claiming benefits were acutely aware of this stereotype, as portrayed on the popular UK tabloid talk show, *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, and felt this was legitimising negative social attitudes towards them. Such portrayals, in turn, activate our evolved desire to protect ourselves from exploiters, and means that the stereotype of the ‘benefits scrounger’ is a powerful one indeed.

### 3.4. Unequal distribution of stigma

It ought to be recognised that any analysis of stigma experienced by families of people in prison needs to recognise the highly gendered and racialized nature of the issue. It had long been recognised that women play a vast role in supporting men and women in prison, and that women, including partners of men in prison, mothers and sisters, typically look after children of people in prison (see Condry, 2007). We thus need to recognise how many of the families of people in prison may also be stigmatised as women, specifically. Women are often blamed and even indirectly punished for the wrongdoing of ‘their men’, such as sons and husbands. Hunter and Nixon’s (2001) study of evictions showed how women were disproportionately held accountable when men in their households acted antisocially. They even discuss one case where a judge indicated that a young man’s wrongdoing was understandable because his mother was pregnant and thus failed to give him due attention, thereby blaming her for his antisocial behaviour. Parenting Orders, too, have been used to punish mothers, with as many as 90% of these orders given to women (Peters, 2012).

The importance of race ought to also be recognised. In the US, Braman (2004) found that ‘the presumption inherent in the stereotype [was] that for them – a low-income black family in Southeast Washington, D.C. – criminality [was] not an aberration’ [emphasis added]. Thus, racial stereotypes might exacerbate overall stigma experienced by these families. Firstly, this is important because over 25% of people in prison in England and Wales are BAME (Prison Reform Trust, 2019), which indicates many of their families may be too. Secondly, racial stigma is well-documented. The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (2016) recently noted that some British newspapers were guilty of, for example, stereotyping Muslim people. Examples discussed in this report included one *The Sun* article using the term ‘cockroaches’ to describe migrants. The latter was clearly referring to Black migrants, as the discussion was around Libyan refugees.

Finally, as already discussed in this article, class and the type of offences involved may also mitigate or exacerbate the overall stigma experienced by families of someone in prison. Fishman (1990), in the US context, found that in working-class communities where imprisonment was not uncommon, it was more likely to be seen as a crisis for the family rather than a strongly stigmatising characteristic. Condry (2007) noted that most of her participants did not come from such communities, but even then not all experienced overt stigma. It may be that families for whom offending is uncommon might fear stigma more often than actually experience manifestations of it (Fishman, 1990). Likewise, some offences, such as sexual ones, carry greater stigma than others. It is not surprising therefore, that one of the relatives in Condry’s (2007: 89) study stated that they felt ‘there’s the definite stigma of it [the offence their relative committed] being a sex offence’.

However, a family that is middle- or upper-class, for example, may

not experience the additional stigma of social exclusion, and may in fact be able to mitigate some of the 'courtesy stigma' by presenting themselves as different to the stereotype of the 'typical' family of someone in prison. This is shown to be the case within the empirical literature. For instance, [Condry's \(2007\)](#) participants often spoke of not being the stereotypical 'criminal family'. In the US, [Braman \(2004\)](#) found that some families of people in prison engaged in distancing themselves from the stereotype of the poor, Black, criminal 'ghetto' family. In doing so, however, such families may be implicitly stigmatising those whom they saw as fulfilling that stereotype. This strategy to mitigate stigma might also operate *within* socially excluded communities as well - for example, [Pemberton et al. \(2016\)](#) found that people in poverty attempted to differentiate themselves from the 'shirkers' and 'scroungers'. This indicates that families of people in prison who are experiencing numerous forms of social exclusion might not be able to mitigate multiple stigmas in this way. In fact, they may be stigmatised not only by society but also by other families of people in prison.

#### 4. Rational judgement and Association Value

Stereotyped information based on lack of contextual knowledge might explain why strangers and society in general may stigmatise families of people in prison, but empirical research also shows they are often stigmatised by those who know them (friends, co-workers). For example, in her study, [Condry \(2007\)](#) found that some of her participants lost their friends after their relatives' imprisonment. It is worth noting that the vast majority of her participants could not be described as being criminal families in the stereotypical sense. Why are families sometimes stigmatised by those who, it can be assumed, know them and their backgrounds, and thus ought to rely less on negative stereotypes? Notably, why do families that do not fulfil the stereotype of the criminal family still experience 'courtesy stigma'?

This can be explained via the second system (System 2) involved in opinion formation, which operates via conscious processing of information. Information is interrogated and evaluated, with logic being engaged. This corresponds to existing research evidence, which has shown that when people receive individualised information, they tend to ignore categorical stereotyped information ([Kunda & Sherman-Williams, 1993](#)). In his study of political opinion formation, [Petersen \(2009\)](#) found that when people were asked to form specific opinions about individual people who offended, they were able to disregard stereotyped information about offending.

We can understand why even those close to the families themselves may stigmatise them using the concept of Association Value. Evolutionary psychology has explored group dynamics and the context in which groups adopt retaliatory or conciliatory responses to offending behaviour ([Petersen, Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2012](#)). A reconciliatory response is more likely to be adopted when the wrongdoer is kin, when his or her social productivity is recognised, when he or she expresses remorse, and when the wrongdoer and the members of the group making the judgements are mutually dependent on each other ([Petersen et al., 2012](#)). This work was focused on responses to people who offend rather than their families, but there is no reason why the key thrust of the argument cannot hold true for families too. What is key is whether the person the judgement is being made about has a low or high perceived Association Value. This is his or her value in relation to future interactions with him or her.

The above discussion implies that those close to the families – their friends or their relatives – ought not to stigmatise them. Again, empirical evidence suggests that friends and families of those whose husbands and other relatives are in prison tend to be quite supportive, despite families fearing being stigmatised by those closest to them (eg [Condry, 2007](#)). Most of the actual stigma tends to come from those outside of close circles, such as neighbours, acquaintances, and strangers on the street. This indeed suggests that when System 2 is utilised, people experience less stigma because stereotypes are less relied upon.

However, empirical evidence suggests that stigmatisation does occur even in the context of very close relationships (eg [Condry, 2007](#)). Firstly, this could be because the 'courtesy stigma' involved is so powerful that having a relative in prison diminishes one's Association Value significantly even if the family is otherwise an ordinary family. 'Prisoner's relative' becomes the master status for the family; they become defined by this overwhelmingly negative label and become people of Low Association Value even if they are 'good people'. One participant in [May's \(2000: 206\)](#) study said that she felt she had become 'a completely different person' after her son was imprisoned for murder, and that she was now a 'murderer's Mum'. So, friends and neighbours might know the family's individual circumstances and thus not be relying on stereotypes, but still feel the low perceived Association Value of that family does not make it worth interacting with them positively. Hence, non-aggressive manifestations of stigma might occur, such as someone crossing the street, or simply shunning the person in question by not inviting them to family gatherings. Moreover, the families themselves might feel as though they have become people of low Association Value and therefore feel stigmatised even if no-one says or does anything to stigmatise them. It is also critical to note that both [Condry \(2007\)](#) and [May \(2000\)](#) looked at families of very serious offenders, which could mean that the seriousness of the offence magnified the stigma experienced by these families by lowering their Association Value significantly.

Secondly, it may be extremely difficult to form a rational judgement about families of someone in prison due to the lack of knowledge about these families' circumstances and characteristics. Secrecy is a commonly-used coping strategy amongst these families ([Condry, 2007](#)), which may result in those around them not knowing about their specific circumstances *even if* they are relatively close (eg friends or colleagues). This might explain why research ([Condry, 2007](#)) has found that close relatives do not usually stigmatise partners and other relatives of those in prison as often as neighbours and acquaintances. Although these neighbours presumably knew the people they were stigmatising, it is possible that they were still reliant on cultural and media stereotypes about offending and the role of the family in offending, as well as socially excluded populations. This could be because they did not have access to all the information necessary to engage System 2, because families of those in prison are reluctant to share information about their status either at all, or beyond a very close circle of trusted friends and family (see [Condry, 2007](#)).

#### 5. Neoliberalism and the weaponisation of stigma

Thus far, I have argued that families of people in prison experience 'courtesy stigma' by virtue of their association to someone who has offended, and, often, direct stigma by virtue of their social exclusion. There is, however, reason to suspect that neoliberalism has in recent years acted to magnify both sources of stigma. Neoliberalism is a broad concept, and one that is often used heterogeneously ([Birch & Springer, 2019](#)). A lengthy discussion of debates surrounding neoliberalism is outside of the scope of this article, but for the purpose of this article I am interested in neoliberalism as a class project 'combining the dispossession of the commons with forms of ideological hegemony' ([Birch & Springer, 2019](#), p. 471). Under the guise of individualism, mobility and freedom of choice, the class power of elites is maintained and a sub-class of 'wasted humans' is produced ([Tyler, 2013](#)).

Beyond simply a class exercise, the elites also utilise neoliberalism as a form of governance ([Tyler, 2013](#)). Since poverty is deemed to be a result of rational choice and fecklessness, the retraction of the welfare state and harsh penal policies are justified. Harsh sanctions for not complying with increasingly demanding and complex welfare benefits rules and regulations is one example ([Shildrick, MacDonald, Webster, & Garthwaite, 2013](#)). Thus, people on benefits are perceived to be 'smiles of criminals' ([Wacquant, 2009](#), p. 60) to be punished. In the context of this article, neoliberalism serves a dual function. It reinforces the deviance of people in prison, thereby strengthening the courtesy stigma

experienced by those close to them. Secondly, it heightened direct stigma, since many of the families this article is concerned with are socio-economically excluded.

Scambler (2018) has argued that recent decades have seen a rather distinct phenomenon: the weaponisation of stigma by the neoliberal state. Although space precludes a fuller discussion of these themes, it is important to recognise the role this weaponisation played within the stigmatisation of families of people in prison. Scambler (2018) rightly argues that modern neoliberal states such as the UK do not just stigmatise characteristics such as poverty. This stigma has been weaponised. This means that the stigma is married to deviance – thus, people living in poverty for example are not just seen as people of Low Association Value but as deviant people. The Troubled Families programme can be used to illustrate this political weaponisation of neoliberalism. The individualism inherent in neoliberal politics sees people in prison and their families as wholly responsible for their plight, and ignores any contextual social injustices such as poverty and exclusion. For example, the Oxford Mail's recent response to concern about the effect of reporting on children of people who commit crime was 'you should have thought about the consequences before committing a crime' (Walker, 2019).

## 6. A multi-faceted model of stigmatisation of families of people in prison

Fig. 1 summarises the processes of stigmatisation developed in this article. The psychological mechanism of opinion formation is the natural starting point for any concept that is inherently rooted in a negative opinion of another – which is precisely what stigmatisation is. Yet to unpack stigmatisation it is important to consider System 1 and System 2:

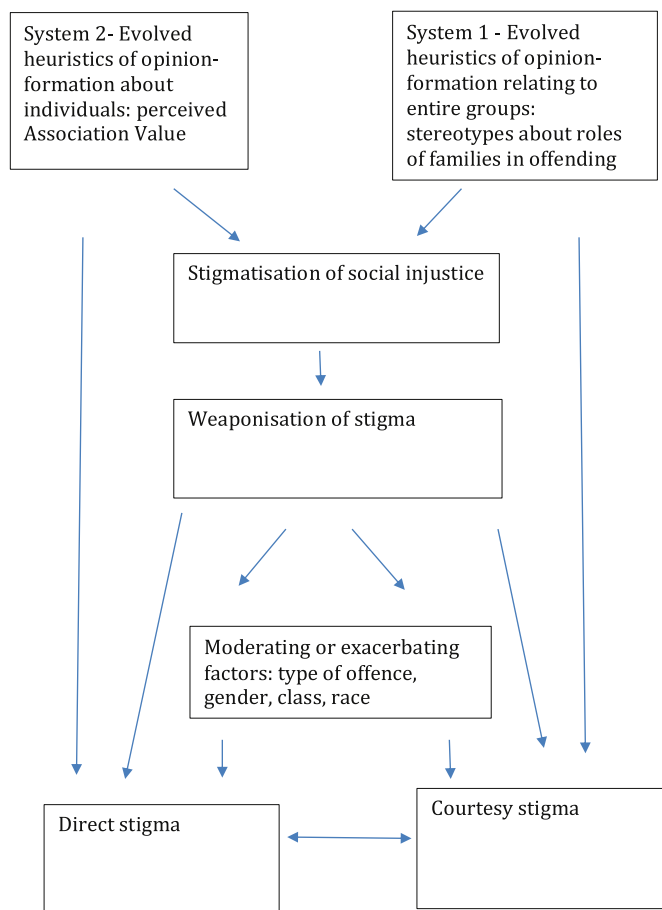


Fig. 1. A multi-faceted and cumulative model of stigmatisation of families of people in prison.

that is, generalised negative opinions that rely on stereotypes and individualised opinions about specific families or relatives that are based upon specific information and rational thought.

The first pathway to stigma is that operated by System 2. This is when an individual makes a rational judgement, having considered the available evidence, as to whether to stigmatise a given family of someone who has offended or not. This is usually only possible when you know that family (since we have access to detailed information about our friends and relatives etc), as without knowledge of their circumstances it is arguably not possible to engage System 2.

As discussed earlier, families report less stigma from those close to them, such as their friends. This could be because System 2 leads people to not stigmatise them, as they realise that these families are usually perfectly ordinary people. However, when families are stigmatised by those close to them, this could be because they are deemed to be people of low Association Value. It is perhaps easier to shun or avoid someone 'tainted' by their connection to a person in prison than to retain a relationship with them, even if you do not actually think they are 'bad people' themselves. As has also been discussed, poverty and other forms of social injustice carry stigma in themselves. We might feel sorry for a family we know, but still avoid or shun them because they are not only connected to someone in prison but also because they are, for example, on benefits. This stigma of social exclusion, as it has been argued in this article, has also been further weaponised so we are inclined to think of people who offend and those on benefits (and other groups) as responsible for their misfortune and thus as bad people. This further enhances direct stigma.

The second route to stigmatisation of families of people in prison, and, arguably, the most common one, is via System 1. This system of judgement-making relies on quick judgement constructed upon stereotypes. As has been discussed earlier, families of people in prison exist within a complex intersection of negative stereotypes. Firstly, there are the stereotypes about the role family plays in offending. Families are seen as having failed to control their misbehaving relatives, and therefore indirectly blameworthy. There are also powerful biologicistic stereotypes about 'bad blood', meaning that if someone in a family is in prison, society assumes that the whole family is deviant. This drives the courtesy stigma and the 'web of shame' discussed by Condry (2007).

Moreover, many of these families experience a range of social injustices, such as socio-economic exclusion. These carry stigma, and serve to further enhance the stereotype of the feckless, lazy, criminal 'under-class'. Again, this has recently been further weaponised by the political class and the media to justify a punitive approach to not just people who offend, but also to those living in poverty. Being linked to someone in prison therefore reinforces the societal view of families of people in prison simplistically as a subgroup that exhibits the worst features of humanity: crime, laziness, willingness to exploit state benevolence, and so on.

Of course, stereotypes can also reinforce direct stigma. Stereotypes can override rational choice; for example, unless we know someone very closely, we might assume that 'everything we knew about them was wrong' if someone in their family goes to prison. The master status of 'prisoner's family' takes over and we might discount the fact that they might, for example, be otherwise good neighbours. This could explain why those who knew individual families but not too closely – acquaintances, neighbours, colleagues – were more likely to stigmatise them than close relatives were.

Moreover, we need to question the extent to which System 1 is actually widely used in this context. In general, we know very little of the experiences of families of people in prison. Due to shame and fear of stigma, these families are often reluctant to disclose details of their experiences, and they are rarely discussed in the media in any depth or with nuance. This could mean that System 1 is more likely to be used when making a judgement about a family of someone in prison, and this overwhelmingly relies on stereotypes. Finally, direct stigma and courtesy stigma reinforce each other – they do not operate separately. A relative of



a prisoner could be stigmatised because of that link, and their socioeconomic status might further reinforce the stereotype that all families of people in prison are feckless benefits scroungers, for example.

## 7. Conclusion

Stigmatisation occurs within a particular social context, and is therefore a messy, complex social phenomenon. Underlying manifestations of stigma – shunning, physical and verbal abuse – is the view that the subject of stigmatisation is ‘less than’, a person with a discredited identity. Social psychology and the work on evolved heuristics has stressed the importance of stereotypes and perceived Association Value in making judgements about people, and ought to be used when trying to theorise stigma in all contexts. After all, negative judgements are the basis for why people are stigmatised.

'Courtesy stigma' is of course an important concept when thinking about the experiences of people in prison. It is unsurprising that being someone related to an individual in prison means that primal notions of 'bad blood' are activated within those making judgements about the person in question. Nonetheless, Condry's (2007) 'web of shame' is limited because it focuses solely on 'courtesy stigma' and does not provide a careful analysis of the underlying biologicistic stereotypes about the role families play in offending behaviours.

This article has argued that families of people in prison are stigmatised for *who they are* in addition to *who they are linked to*. Many of these families are stigmatised because they are poor, working-class, and also because they are women and/or BAME. Yet these additional dimensions of stigma have not yet been meaningfully engaged with in the literature, despite empirical work on families of people in prison hinting that these characteristics may also carry stigma. In fact, research on race and on welfare benefits has long shown that race and poverty carry stigma. We also know that women are often blamed for the wrongdoings of 'their' men. Finally, it has been argued that stigma has, in recent years, been actively weaponised by the neoliberal state to conflate social exclusion with deviance.

Although this framework focuses on the UK context and on families of people in prison specifically, it is flexible and nuanced enough to be useful when considering other stigmatised groups. For example, it could be used to understand why families of people with disabilities and mental illness are stigmatised. It also allows for a consideration of the unequal distribution of stigma and accounts for why those living in poverty, female relatives and BAME relatives might experience more stigma than White, middle-class families. Time has certainly come for a social understanding of stigma; unless and until we recognise that it is rooted in fundamental social injustices and constructed upon socio-cultural stereotypes, we cannot meaningfully say we understand how stigma operates.

### Declaration of Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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